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Forerunners of Indiana Art

By GEORGE S. COTTMAN, Indianapolis, Ind.

Of latter-day art in Indiana, which has added honor to the name of Hoosier, much has been said in a passing way, but the forerunners of that art—the first esthetic expressions of our people, have escaped notice or comment. The first aspirants whose souls soared above mere utility, were so isolated and obscure that the little part they played is all but lost to the memory of man. A counterpane or quilt, treasured in a family here and there, with the simple tradition that “grandma made it,” is about all that remains by way of record, unless we except obscure and indirect records that are more than apt to be missed by the chronicler. One, for example, might hardly think to turn to the dry old official reports of the State Board of Agriculture as a source of information about art beginnings, yet those reports, as foreign as they would seem from things of this sort, have preserved from utter oblivion not a few names that should be remembered very kindly by those of today who stand for the upward trend and the struggle away from the sordid.

The records referred to are, in brief, the premium lists of the yearly fairs. The first State fair was held in 1852, and it is interesting to find that in this agricultural exhibit of a State that was predominantly agricultural some attention was paid to the beauty side of life. Among the home-made articles receiving premiums and mention we find lace caps, Ottoman covers, ornamental shell work, fancy baskets, lamp mats, chenille work and artificial flowers. There is also a natural flower display.

The following year the list of articles of this sort is enlarged, and still further enlarged in successive years, the range including fancy chair covers and tidies, fancy worsted work, fancy penmanship, etc. Pictorial art was represented the first year only by “monochromatic” drawings, by Lucy D. Carlisle, aged nine, but in 1853 the committee on special articles reported “several beautiful specimens of landscape paint-

ing," the artists being Miss S. Benbridge, James Crawford, Jacob Strilling, G. W. Morrison and Jacob Cox. The highest award, fifteen dollars, was given to Morrison, and Cox got ten dollars.

By 1857 the list of exhibiting artists had increased to a quite considerable number, and the localities they hailed from are given as follows: Jacob Cox, Mrs. M. A. Talbott, Mrs. A. G. Porter, Miss Mary E. Hill and R. D. Musgrave, Marion county; James D. Wright and James F. Gookins, Vigo county; Mrs. Rebecca Vance and Miss E. S. Vance, Henry county; Miss Mary J. Ball, Lake county. This exhibit, about twenty pieces in all, was somewhat heterogeneous, consisting of landscapes portraits, still lifes, pen and crayon drawings, fancy penmanship and "fancy paintings," whatever that may mean. Of the persons named Jacob Cox, James F. Gookins and George W. Morrison attained to some prominence and are still remembered. Of the three least is known about Morrison, but Mrs. Kate Milner Rabb, of Indianapolis, is authority for the statement that he came from Baltimore to Indiana in 1840 and located in New Albany, where specimens of his art may now be found.

An artist of the pioneer period whose pictures are still found up and down the Wabash valley, and who for his services to both art and history deserved more fame than he has fallen heir to, was George Winter. Winter was an Englishman, who had studied painting at the Royal Academy, in London. In 1837 he came to Logansport, and for the better part of forty years he resided there and at Lafayette, wringing a livelihood out of art as a profession, and managing to do so by periodical raffles of the products of his brush. What drew him to the Wabash region was the Indian life, still lingering there, with its picturesque features. In the portrayal of this life he produced many pieces of decided historical value, including council scenes, portraits of notable chiefs and the Indian dress and customs. Subsequently he painted many local landscapes, among which were at least half a dozen views of the Tippecanoe battleground. One of the latter, of quite heroic size, he presented to the State of Indiana, and the State, not having grace enough to take care of it, let it go the way of all junk.¹

As far back as the twenties New Harmony, with its rare

¹ For sketch of Winters and his work, see Vol. I, No. 3, of this magazine.

aggregation of talent of many kinds, boasted several artists, but these, exotic, borrowing nothing from the life to which they had been transplanted and adding little to it, can hardly be reckoned as among the "forerunners" of our indigenous art. In this connection may be mentioned Christopher Harrison, Indiana's first Lieutenant-Governor, who prior to his public life spent several years as a hermit on the bluffs of the Ohio, where Hanover now stands. Harrison, so tradition says, brought with him his paints and brushes, and with them whiled away the lonely hours, but how serious were his efforts is not known.

The discouragements of the artists are proverbial, but in our pioneer days they were more desperate than now, and he who surmounted them had persistence indeed. About the first sympathetic notice that Jacob Cox ever received came from Peter Fishe Reed, a fellow-idealist who, in 1852, lauded his work and congratulated him on his determination to give up the tinner's trade and devote himself entirely to art—which change, Reed facetiously remarked, would afford his friend "more comfort but less tin." By that time Cox had been painting pictures for some years, but Reed states that he had never seen in the public prints any notice or appreciation of him, and he wondered that he (Cox) did not go to Cincinnati, where he would have a chance.

An unpolished diamond with a determination to shine not to be thwarted was Joseph O. Eaton, who came to Indianapolis in the latter forties as a runaway from his home in Ohio, wearing one of his father's old coats, which was much too large for him. His father wanted him to be a farmer, but Joseph elected to be an artist, and as proof of his talent in that line brought with him two portraits, one of George Washington and the other of an itinerant Methodist preacher. The father of his country looked as if intended for a tavern sign, and both pictures are described as "frightful daubs." Nevertheless, on the strength of them he succeeded in drumming up custom and, it is said, "painted whole families at five dollars ahead." Among these subjects was no less a person than Governor Whitcomb. This Whitcomb portrait was once owned by Judge Biddle, of Logansport, and is probably still in existence. From Indianapolis Eaton went to Cincinnati, and subsequently to New York City. He became a portrait painter of note, and

it is said that in Cincinnati he cleared up a respectable fortune.

Other names that should be mentioned in this connection are Jacob Cox, John H. Niemeyer, John G. Dunn, Peter Fishe Reed and James B. Dunlap. Cox, the best known of these, devoted himself to art in Indianapolis for fifty years, though obliged, for the sake of a livelihood, to retain a connection with the tinning business, which he learned as a young man. His art career seems to have begun in 1840, when he was called upon to paint a banner for the Tippecanoe campaign. After that he studied for a while in Cincinnati, then painted and taught in Indianapolis, where he came to be regarded as the Nestor of the profession. He may, perhaps, be spoken of as the true forerunner of the art that has since sprung up. Niemeyer, an Indianapolis sign painter, took his first art lessons of Cox, then studied in New York, then in Europe, and after that became a professor of drawing and painting at Yale College, and a lecturer on art. Dunn, a son of George H. Dunn, an eminent lawyer of the State, was an erratic character with the temperament of an artist, who might have made his mark had he possessed tenacity of purpose. Cox describes him as "a genius with much ill-jointed, badly-directed talent," and adds that "his coloring was exquisite and his invention wonderful." He got nowhere, however, was given to dissipation, and died young, leaving as a tragic token of both his talent and his moral trials and struggles a temperance painting representing a man with pen in hand and the pledge before him, on one side a woman urging him to sign it, while on the other Satan, just visible in the shadows, tempts him with a glass. The piece, in its appeal to the imagination, bears out Cox's comment as to the artist's invention. Peter Fishe Reed was a versatile genius of the middle-century period, who stood loyally for the fine arts and produced both paintings and literature, besides being a devotee of music. His work in the two lines still exists but is rare. Dunlap was an Indianapolis man, who left as a proof of his talents many clever sketches, and at least one piece of sculpture—a bust of Captain Sutter, which is now in the State Library.

In the State Library hangs what is probably the oldest existing Indiana painting. It is of Hyacinth Lasselle, and a memorandum in the handwriting of Charles B. Lasselle, his son, states that it was painted by Louis Peckham at Vincennes,

in 1812. Another portrait in the Library is of John B. Dillon, the historian, when a young man, and this is attributed to a now-forgotten artist by the name of Stephens, who painted this piece at Logansport in 1835.

It should be added to this cursory sketch that, as early as 1853, the question of an "Academy of Arts" for Indianapolis was proposed, and that in 1856 the Indianapolis Art Society, for the encouragement of local artists, came into existence. All of which goes to show that before our present crop of trained artists there was a pronounced impulse toward an indigenous art expression.